

Jornada del Muerto

The Trip of Death

By Bob Faust

Even in death inexplicable moments of joy and humor can be found. Oh, death, to be sure, is not a funny thing. There is the sadness, the loss, the void left in our hearts that was once filled by our loved ones. But, even the sorrow surrounding the mourning of the dead may be tinged with unexpected moments of laughter and unforeseen insight. Such were the moments I had at the time my grandfather passed away.

My grandpa, Claud and grandma, Neva (who went by Jerri) retired to a cozy trailer park in Ruidoso, New Mexico back in the late 1970's. It was in Ruidoso that my grandpa kept a small vegetable garden and there that my grandma made an imagined fortune by betting on horses at Ruidoso Downs. To be clear, my grandma had an uncanny ability to pick winning horses by studying racing forms, researching jockeys and knowing the lineage and tendencies of each horse. She placed her bets by talking back to the radio in her kitchen as she listened to the races. Of the few times that she actually went to the track, she did not fare well. Her racetrack fortunes were a private accomplishment.

My grandparents spent their remaining years in Ruidoso until my grandpa died of congestive heart failure¹. I am told that the week before my grandpa was admitted to the hospital he was out in the yard, mowing grass and tending to his garden. I can only hope that I will have a similar experience as I inch my way toward my demise. I received the news of my grandpa's passing and quickly made arrangements to drive out for the funeral. Trice and I were living together in Arlington, Texas. Neither of us had vacation time so we had to make a fast and furious weekend trip.

We set out in our new Chevy S-10, (rest in peace, old friend), and crawled our way through the busy highways that linked Arlington and Fort Worth. We watched the hot Texas ball of fire, known simply as the sun by non-Texans, grudgingly sink beneath the horizon in front of us as we entered Weatherford, Texas.

Dusk deepened and we saw a large black cat glide across the street in front of us. Trice and I were amazed at the size of the cat. This was not just some overgrown tomcat. Its long, curled tail drooped as it stealthily padded across the street. As the headlights briefly shed light upon it we got a better look. It was long and lanky and jet black. We knew that it must have been a cougar. I've never heard of black puma inhabiting north Texas but, there it was, doing its best to avoid us and slink away to hide. We continued down the road, dumbfounded by the encounter.

A few moments after the puma incident we came upon a grisly scene upon the road. Darkness had fallen now and our headlights cast light on a wide,

¹ Sam Claud Walker (1907-1992), FGM # 16597588

glistening red slick spot on the road and just as we were assimilating what might have caused the mess we saw the source. A massive truncated beast lay in the middle of the road, clearly the result of a road collision. It was too small to be a cow or horse but it could have been a large hog. I swerved around it but couldn't avoid driving through the shiny, sticky blood spilled by the poor beast. There was an unspoken understanding between Trice and I that these events were omens of the trip ahead. If we had been merely taking a weekend vacation we would have turned around at that point and headed back home but, we had an obligation to uphold and were duty bound.

We were in open country now. We had entered the beginning of the flat expanse that spreads across west Texas. The grass grew high on both sides of the road and it reminded me of tufts of bleached, swaying hay as we sped down the highway. Just as my nerves began to settle, I saw a rabbit on the side of the road ahead us. I eased over to the center of road as we approached, making sure to avoid hitting it but, to my surprised horror, the rabbit leapt in front of the truck and we hit it squarely. To me, there is nothing quite as upsetting as hearing the "thadunk, ker-thunk" after running over an animal. In my defense, I cried out to explain that I had tried to avoid the rabbit to the best of my abilities. I'm not sure if I was defending myself to the dead rabbit or Trice. We drove on in silence for a little while. This was not the last animal killed on our trek. Not by a long shot!

The roadkill roundup carried on all through the night. The list of struck animals began to unfurl like some sort of twisted, nightmarish tale of Noah's ark. The dozens of critters that met their demise that night was appalling. It included, but perhaps was not limited to, mice, rats, toads, turtles, snakes, a skunk, an opossum, an armadillo and some birds, including a large owl, which nearly scared me to death as it collided with the windshield. At one point I saw a whole family of rabbits running alongside the road, as if trying to pace us. There were two adult rabbits and two or three younger rabbits, all rushing to meet us. Each of them, one by one, leapt in front of the truck and met their demise. By the time the sun was rising behind us, we had passed into New Mexico and the killing ceased but we were still reeling from the horrible night's journey. Trice and I flinched at every little thing that we saw, or imagined to see moving around us.

Tired and shaken we pulled into the beautiful, pine covered mountains of Ruidoso and pulled onto the crunchy gravel driveway of my grandparent's trailer home. There, waiting at the end of our odyssey was my precious little grandmother, with arms opened wide. Grandma brought us in and listened to our tale as she made us bacon and eggs for breakfast, as she had done every day for as long as I can remember. Now, it needs to be mentioned that Trice has a long standing repulsion to eggs. Even the smell of them makes her queasy. The cause of her dislike of eggs stems from a traumatic childhood episode that is worthy of its own accounting but, suffice it to say, she and eggs do not agree.

Prior to meeting my grandma for the first time, I had warned Trice that my grandma was a talker. And by that, I meant she talked nonstop. My grandmother had somehow managed to find a way to keep talking even when drawing in breaths. It was an instantly recognizable and impressive talent. So, when grandma sat us all down with plates of eggs, bacon and toast, Trice politely and carefully

avoided the eggs on her plate as she sipped her tea and ate toast and bacon. All the while, my grandma, who sat right next to Trice, talked and talked throughout breakfast, spewing bits of egg onto Trice's plate as she chattered away. Much to her credit, Trice weathered the onslaught of egginess and subsequently became a treasure to my grandma.

After breakfast, Trice and I checked into a motel and slept the morning away in a cold, dark motel room. Such bliss after a long terrible drive. After we had awakened refreshed, I recalled a time when my stepfather and I went on an early morning fishing trip with my grandpa, while vacationing in Ruidoso. My grandfather drove down a winding road in the pre-dawn hours on our way to the lake at the Inn of the Mountain Gods Casino and Resort . It was a quiet drive, the kind that only men can truly appreciate. We were at peace just being peaceful together. And then I saw a skunk waddling across the road. My grandfather seemed oblivious to it but my stepfather and I began to lean, as if trying to will the car to swerve around the skunk but, alas, my grandpa plowed right over the poor thing and then came the awful sound, "tha-dunk, ker-thunk"! I winced and stifled a scream as we hit the skunk. My grandpa drove on, as if he hadn't even noticed that he had hit anything. After we pulled into the parking lot at the lake we piled out of the truck and nearly fell over from the overwhelming stench from the skunk. My grandfather said, "Somebody must have hit a skunk!" My stepfather and I couldn't hold back the laughter any longer. It was then that I discovered that it's very difficult to laugh while breathing in putrid skunk fumes.

The funeral and burial services were a wonderful testament to a wonderful man and I was glad that I made the journey, despite all of the carnage that came with it. The next morning, Trice and I made our way back home, dreading the thought that we might have another series of deadly encounters but, after several hours of not killing things with our truck, we felt that the gods had been appeased and that we would find our way safely home without more bloodshed. But, as the late afternoon turned to early evening we hit a swarm of gnats. At first it was a novelty, the sort of thing that one might recall later as a bizarre but benign inconvenience. The cloud of gnats were so thick that we had to turn on the windshield wipers and squirt window washing fluid just to be able to see. And then it got worse. The sky became darkened by the plague of gnats and we had to drive with the windshield wipers going at full speed. We quickly ran out of windshield wiper fluid and had to drive another ten miles with gnat guts building up on the windshield. The wipers, without the fluid were barely effective. As the cloud of gnats diminished we saw a lonely gas station and pulled over to wash the truck off. The attendant came out to greet us and told us that they were out of water. Apparently we weren't the first travelers to break free from the gnat storm, only to discover that we had to deal with the problem as best as we could. We wiped off globs of goo with paper towels but it did little good. We drove the rest of the way shifting our heads about, trying to see through the smeary mess left by the remnants of millions of tiny gnats.

We made our way back home weary and still wondering what it all meant. We made a trip to celebrate a great man's life but were confronted with near-constant, frightening and shocking death along the way. The next morning I headed to work, still reeling from the bizarre trip of death. My route to work

included a harrowing trip down Hwy 121 between Arlington and Fort Worth. The highway had six lanes on each side and was always full of furious drivers, whizzing in and out of lanes at high speeds. I stayed in the middle lane, as usual, trying to allow impatient drivers plenty of room to swerve around me on their way to their own particular doom. As I approached my exit I saw something very small sitting perfectly still in the center of my lane. From about 1,000 feet I spotted a tiny mouse. The previous day's journeys had caused my senses to be hyperaware. I gripped the steering wheel bracing myself for the inevitable. The mouse leapt out of the path from one car after another, bouncing back and forth from lane to lane, avoiding death and waiting for me. I knew it was waiting for me. The mouse hopped back into my lane. There could be no slowing down on this stretch of the highway, lest I risk a major multi-car pileup. I grimaced and closed my eyes as I straddled the mouse. When I opened my eyes I quickly stared into the rear view mirror, dreading another notch in my roving weapon only to see the mouse scurry beneath one car and then another and make it safely to the side of road. The trip of death was over and I laughed and cheered, knowing that all was right again.

